

Heartbeats by agnesamaranth

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Summary:

A series of one-shots in which Mike and El say "I love you."

1. The Rollercoaster

Author's Note:

Hello all! It's been a little while since I posted here—I've been busy with the holidays and I've been doing a bit of writing on Tumblr lately. These stories were actually originally posted on my Tumblr account (valbirch)—written for requests from a list of prompts. I thought I'd crosspost them here for fun.

Anyways, I've got quite a few of them lined up, so updates should be frequent. Please enjoy! Thoughts & comments are always appreciated <3

Prompt: With a shuddering gasp

El's palms are clammy with sweat and she finds herself continually having to readjust her grip, one hand clinging to Mike's and the other firmly wrapped around the steel bar that, despite being clamped tightly over her lap, has not minimized the shaking of her knees. She isn't quite sure how she allowed her friends to talk her in to this; how she let herself be convinced that this excursion would be any fun. But Dustin and Max had pleaded with baby faces ("I can't believe you're seventeen and you've never been on a roller coaster!"), Will and Mike had smiled encouragingly (It's really fun, promise!), and Lucas had told her about his being able to ride the Twister without holding on ("Since I was twelve!").

And so, El finds herself slowly rising above Hawkins, the town growing smaller and smaller under her nervous gaze. Her back pressed against worn leather, her hair whipping in the cool autumn breeze, the rhythmic 'tck-tck' of the coaster's wheels creating the soundtrack to her fear, El takes a deep breath and tries to push back the feelings of grotesque anticipation rising up her throat, her ears carefully attuned for any change in that rhythmic clicking. She knows, only because Mike had kindly warned her, that once that ticking sound stops, the coaster will turn downhill and she works to steel her stomach from the numbness, the loss of her core, that Mike had explained while they were in line.

“Are you okay?” Mike asks, raising his voice over the mechanical noises of the coaster and the gusts of wind. El doesn’t look at him, keeping her eyes locked in front of her, though at this point, all she can see is the pale grey of the clouds. “Your hands are sweaty!” She can hear the smirk in Mike’s voice and clenches his hand tighter, partly for revenge and partly because those mechanical clicks are getting slower. Tension builds in the pit of her stomach.

“Mike,” El’s voice is low, shuddering.

“I’ve got you,” Mike reassures her, squeezing her hand for good measure, “Are you ready?” The clicks have stopped. Frightened, not thinking straight, shivering with anticipation, El opens her mouth.

“Mike, I lo—” Her voice stops, words turning into a loud gasp as the coaster sharply shifts angles, suddenly speeding downhill.

“Scream!” she hears Mike shout from beside her, “It’ll help!”

For a moment, El makes no noise. She listens and she hears Max’s unmistakable giggle, Lucas’s deep shouts, Dustin’s hollered curses, and Will’s whoops of joy. And, from directly beside her, she hears Mike’s contagious laughter, a sound that fills her with happiness. Following their example, El screams and all the tension and fear rapidly melts away until she’s laughing louder than all her friends.

Afterwards, as she and Mike are sharing a large cloud of blue cotton candy, Mike looks at her with a winning smile.

“Did you like your first roller coaster?” he asks with a grin.

“It was alright,” El replies, a smirk on her lips.

“Were you trying to tell me something?” Mike asks, “While we up at the top of the hill?” El blushes and her smirk grows, but she shakes her head, feigning ignorance.

“No.” She shrugs, “You must have been hearing things.” Mike rolls his eyes (he knows exactly what she was going to say up there) and tears a piece of cotton candy away from the cloud, tossing at her. El, with raised eyebrows, uses her powers to slow it down and catch it, popping it into her mouth with a smug grin.

2. Snowflakes

Notes for the Chapter:

Prompt: Too quickly, muttered into your scarf

(Note: these stories are not chronological and not really related to one another—each one is kind of its own thing)

The first snowfall of the New Year had brought about a busy day for Mike Wheeler and his best friends. Free from school due to the severe weather and messy roadways, Mike, Dustin, Lucas, and Will had bundled up—in coats and scarves, gloves and hats, ski pants and boots—and had taken El sledding in Cherry Park. It wasn't the biggest or steepest hill in Hawkins, but it was quieter and allowed more space for shenanigans; for loudly pretending their sleds were the Millennium Falcon jumping to light speed as they barrelled down the hill. Following that, a snowball fight had ensued. In hindsight, it had been enormously unfair, tilted in Mike's favour given El's extraordinary talents. Once the rest of the boys had gone home, cold and tired and damp, Mike had begged his mother for one extra hour of being outdoors before dinner so that he could make a snowman with El.

Carrot (the snowman, named for his crooked nose) completed, oddly shaped but fully dressed, Mike and El stand in the Wheeler's front yard, catching their breath as they silently watch the snow fall across the glowing light of the streetlamps, night rapidly settling in. Nose and cheeks red, lips chapped, and eyes weary, Mike turns away from the street to face El—a much prettier sight, in his opinion. Her eyes follow his movements, shifting over his face until she meets his gaze, snowflakes landing delicately on her lashes. Mike suddenly feels as though his world has started spinning, a blank and confusing feeling washing over his brain and halting every thought. It's a strange sensation, given Mike's penchant for overthinking all matters to do with El. In a moment of abandon, he leans forward and kisses her quickly, letting his lips brush against hers for short seconds before he pulls back. In spite of the freezing temperatures, Mike nearly melts at the small, satisfied smile that lights up El's face.

Unable to take his eyes from her, Mike watches as thick soft snowflakes dance around El, swirling over her honey-coloured hair and landing on the tip of her nose before melting away. A feeling of desperation seizes him, similar to the way he felt that night in the cafeteria—a night that they only talk about in the wake of a nightmare or a panic attack—but amplified a hundred times. An urgent need to express his feelings to her grips him, but so too does an inability to do just that. What could he possibly say that would let her know? He had some ideas—three words uttered together that he'd heard Nancy say over the phone to Steve almost every night since last Christmas—but Nancy was seventeen now and he wasn't sure how old you needed to be to use those words. Could kids like him have those feelings? Were you supposed to think about those feelings before having them or were they beyond thought? Was he...?

“Mike?” El's soft whisper brings him away from his train of thought, going nowhere quickly, “Jim is here.”

The desperation in Mike's mind is suddenly mingled with sheer panic growing in the pit of his stomach as he turns to look over his shoulder, catching sight of the Chief's cruiser parked at the end of his driveway. Hopper is very clearly watching them through the windshield, his face full of paternal scrutiny. Mike is suddenly all too aware of his hands and how awkward they are, balled into fists and floating somewhere over El's waist, afraid to commit to any spot on her person. He snaps them back to his sides, soldier-like, as he returns his gaze to El.

“Today was fun,” she says with a smile. El doesn't seem to notice his discomfort—or, if she does, she doesn't mention it. Instead, she pushes herself up onto her tiptoes, so that she's eye-to-eye with him and gently presses the tip of her nose to his, an action she has also recently taken up with Holly.

El's movements send her scarf into Mike's face and he can smell her mint chewing gum, her tropical shampoo, and the familiar scent of the Byers's house—Jonathan's cooking and traces of pine. Overwhelmed, desperation comes back to Mike in full force and he quickly mutters words that he's never used before—at least not for a girl, not in this way.

“ilayoel.”

Perhaps a little too quick—they’re not so much words as unfamiliar sounds. El drops back down to the balls of her feet and looks at him sideways, confusion etched into her soft rosy features. She silently asks him for an explanation with her searching eyes, as she’s done so many times since her return.

“Don’t worry about it,” Mike sighs, turning a shade of crimson that El has never seen on a human before.

“Important?” she asks, her vocabulary expanded but her sentences still short as her mouth adjusts to an influx of new words. Mike shakes his head.

“It’s just...” He reaches around to rub the back of his neck, suddenly very sweaty, shivering when the cool snow on his glove makes contact with his warm skin. When he opens his mouth to speak again, the sharp sound of a car horn cuts through the otherwise still air between them. Mike is secretly thankful for the distraction as it draws El’s focus—her intense stare—away from his face. “I’ll tell you later,” he says with a short nod, “Later.”

“Tomorrow?”

“Sure,” Mike grimaces, his voice noncommittal as he steps away from El. Steeling his nerves, Mike waves at the Chief as El skips towards the cruiser and is almost relieved to see him nod curtly in response.

3. The Phone Call

Notes for the Chapter:

Prompt: From far away

Under his blue patterned comforter and propped up on his blue patterned pillows, Mike Wheeler carefully thumbs through his well-read copy of *The Return of the King*, searching for lengthier descriptions of the Witch-King of Angmar, hoping to draw inspiration from Tolkien's words for his next campaign, currently in the earliest stages of planning. On the bed beside him, an old worn notebook lays open, a pencil waiting across its lined pages and a small doodle in its margins—a heart with the letter E in its center.

A crackle of static draws Mike's attention away from the small print of his novel and towards the radio resting atop his bedside table, right next to the tall glass of chocolate milk his mother had brought up just a few minutes earlier on her way to put Holly to bed. It's already starting to condensate in the warmth of his bedroom.

"Mike? Hello?" El's voice rings out, crisp and clear, just as Mike sets aside his book, placing the pencil between its pages to protect his spot. He can tell, immediately, that El is using her powers to strengthen their connection, to bring them closer together through the airwaves. The Byers's house is much too far away for there to be so little interference—whenever Will tries to reach him over the radio, it's a struggle to make out every third word.

"Hey El! How's it going? Over." Mike replies, grabbing the radio from its spot and sitting further up in bed.

"Good," El's voice returns, "I finished the work that Nancy gave me." There's a lull following her words and Mike smirks to himself. El has not yet picked up the habit of finishing her radio statements with "over" and he, of course, would never dream of correcting her over something so trivial, even though he's sure to roll his eyes and point it out whenever Dustin is delivering news so exciting that he forgets to say it.

“El, hold on.” Mike has an idea, “Let me get the phone and call you, okay? I don’t want you to get a headache or anything. Over and out.” He switches the radio off with a click and gently tosses it aside as he leaps out of bed. Mike hurries to Nancy’s room, knocking urgently on her door, as though there were an inter-dimensional monster on his heels. After a moment that feels like an eternity, Nancy appears at the door, hair wet from the shower but thankfully not on a telephone call.

“Can I have the phone?” Mike asks, words running together in his haste, “I need to call El back.” Smirking knowingly, Nancy opens the door and gestures for Mike to enter, pointing at where the phone rests in its carriage on her dresser.

“Thanks Nance,” he mumbles, ducking in, picking up the device and heading back to his room as he dials the familiar number—Nancy watching with amusement the entire time. After two rings, someone at the Byers’s answers.

“Hi Mike.” The voice is El’s, thankfully. Mike is relieved, glad it wasn’t the Chief who picked up. The sound of his gruff voice on the other end of the phone always causes the hairs on the back of Mike’s neck to stand on end.

“Hey,” Mike says as he closes his door and flops back down onto his bed, “I’m happy your tutoring is working out. I’m super excited for when you can start school with me and the guys. You can join our team for the Science Fair and we’ll definitely win first place again.” Mike, of course, has thought through the scenario of El’s first year at school a thousand times, running each possible outcome through his mind—the positive and the negative.

“Yes.” El’s voice is absent and Mike can tell there’s something as of yet unspoken on her mind.

“El?” he ventures, “Is something bothering you?” For a moment, El doesn’t reply. He hears deep silence, punctuated by a heavy sigh. Mike grows concerned until her voice once again sounds into his ear.

“Mike?” she begins, “What is a date?”

“A date?” Mike echoes, his voice raising an octave or two, caught off guard by the question, “It’s, uh, it’s when two people go out together, like to the movies or for a milkshake or something.”

“Or the Snow Ball?” El asks. With a small smile, Mike recollects that particular night, three weeks earlier, when El had walked down the stairs from Nancy’s room in the most stunning blue dress he’d ever seen and it had taken all his strength not to let his jaw drop to the floor.

“Yeah,” Mike replies, “Just like that. But usually less, I don’t know, less formal.”

“Oh,” El says and Mike can practically see the way her nose is wrinkled and her eyes are narrowed, demanding further clarification, “Jonathan and Nancy have a date.”

“Oh,” Mike sighs, “I know. They’re going to an art show in the city this weekend.”

“Can we go?” she asks, “For a date?” Mike’s heart skips a beat and he nearly drops the radio, his palms suddenly slick.

“Me and you?” he says, mouth dry and throat itchy, “On a date?”

“Yes. Like the Snow Ball.” El’s voice is flat and Mike can tell he’s making far more of this than she is. He attempts to steady his heart and his breathing all at once.

“I’d like that, El,” Mike replies, nodding vigorously, forgetting that she cannot see him, “I’ll ask Nancy if she and Jon can drive us with them.”

“Thank you, Mike.” He hears her stifle a yawn over his name and laughs softly.

“You sound tired,” Mike tells her, “Night El.”

“Night Mike,” she replies, voice quiet yet frank. “I love you.” She hangs up and the connection is broken, the line gone dead, before Mike can reply. Even so, he can do nothing but sputter, his eyes wide as saucers and his mouth hanging open in disbelief. The phone

dangles uselessly from his hands before it slips through his numb fingers to land on the carpeted floor.

Did she just...?

Was that...?

Does she...?

Oh my god.

Mike, failing to form a single coherent thought, jumps out of bed and rushes again to Nancy's room. Not for the phone this time, but for some desperately needed advice.

4. The Storm

Notes for the Chapter:

Prompt: As we huddle together, the storm raging outside

Reminder: these are all unrelated, so there's no real continuity here. Maybe that's something for the future ;)

"You look terrible," El comments with a smirk as she hands her boyfriend a towel, watching as he drips copious amounts of water onto the welcome mat in the entryway of their tiny apartment.

"It's a disaster out there," Mike mutters, "Apocalyptic." He folds himself forward and uses the offered towel to dry his long hair. Usually unruly, it is now sopping wet, clinging to his pale forehead; a consequence of the quick venture from the corner bus stop to the lobby of their walk-up. His jeans, too, are soaked to the knees, his socks waterlogged beneath canvas sneakers, and the expensive biology textbook in his backpack likely damaged. "And the prof cancelled class at the last minute," Mike adds as he straightens up, shaking his head and laughing as El dodges the thick drops of water flying from his hair with a squeal.

"I'll make some cocoa," she offers, sticking her tongue out, "You should change before you catch pneumonia." El turns and pads down to the end of the short hall to their modest kitchen, kept surprisingly tidy for two college students. Mike follows along behind her, having ditched his shoes and socks at the front door, ducking into the bedroom on the left to trade his soaked clothes for a fresh pair of warm pyjamas.

In the kitchen, El stands over the stove warming milk, listening to the heavy patter of rain against the windows. It had been sunny that morning when Mike had left for class but since noon the grey skies and rain had been unrelenting. Her eyes focused on the urn of milk, El does not see the brilliant display of lightning against the darkening sky, but she does hear the thunder that follows, powerful and

unforgiving. Her shoulders tense, the lurching motion of her arm causing some steaming milk to spill over the lip of the urn and over her skin.

“Shoot,” she gasps, wincing slightly as she wipes the stray drops away onto her flannel shirt.

“You okay?” she hears Mike holler from the other side of the apartment; his voice too far away to be in the bedroom, she wonders vaguely what he’s doing.

“Yeah,” El calls back to him, hearing his footsteps hurrying towards her. He rounds the corner into the kitchen and comes up behind her. “It was just the thunder...” Her voice trails off and Mike sighs. At least eight inches taller than her, he leans forward to rest his chin on her shoulder.

“Your hair smells nice,” he whispers into her ear and she can feel the grin on his lips. El knows this is Mike’s attempt to distract her from the not-so-pleasant memories threatening to bubble up into her consciousness and she knows that it’s working. Playfully, she swats at him and instructs him to reach for the cocoa in one of the higher cupboards.

“What would you do without me?” Mike teases her, stretching over her head to fulfill her request. El glares at him, her lips pursed. The thunder continues to sound outside, but it no longer rattles her.

“I think I’d be able to reach the cocoa,” she mutters under her breath, snatching the jar of powder from Mike’s hands and spooning it into the mugs that have been waiting on the countertop.

“Meet you in the living room,” Mike says while she works, bounding out of the room before she can protest. El takes her time adding the steamed milk to the cocoa powder, stirring carefully and topping off each mug with a generous portion of marshmallows and artfully drizzled chocolate syrup. The cocoa prepared, El grabs a plate from one of the lower cupboards and sets out a selection of cookies, chocolate chip, oatmeal, shortbread—all homemade by Mike, who has taken to calling his hobby “procrasti-baking.”

Taking a mug in each hand and floating the plate of cookies behind her, El makes her way to the living room, a laugh escaping her lips as she lays her eyes upon the scene Mike has prepared. He's pushed the two-seater sofa over the window and haphazardly decked it out in an obscene number of blankets, creating an adult-sized blanket fort.

"M'lady," Mike delivers a mock bow as El enters the room, gesturing towards the fort, "Shall we?" With amusement, El sets down the cocoa and cookies on the windowsill and crawls in amongst the blankets, Mike following and settling in beside her. He wraps one arm loosely around her waist while the other reaches for the mugs of cocoa, handing one to her before sipping from his own.

They sit for what seems like hours, huddled together, eyes drinking in the spectacle of forked lightning and trees bending in the wind. Eventually, just before nightfall, the storm knocks the power out, the streetlamps outside their window going suddenly dark. The mugs discarded on the floor and the cookies devoured, Mike pulls El closer and kisses the top of her head.

"Remember the night we met?" he whispers against her hair, "The weather was just like this."

"Mhm," El mumbles against his shoulder, her eyes closed, "That was a long time ago."

"It was," Mike agrees, pausing for a beat, staring out into the darkness. "I love you El." Her eyes open and look up at him, soft, trusting hazel meeting deep, thoughtful brown.

"I love you too Mike."

Notes for the Chapter:

Thanks to everyone who has taken the time to read & like this! A special thanks to those of you leaving your thoughts in the form of comments. They always make me feel like what I do is worth it.

5. Twelve

Summary for the Chapter:

Prompt: Broken, as you clutch the sleeve of my jacket and beg me not to leave.

Notes for the Chapter:

This one is a little more dramatic than all the rest, but it is one of my favourites. And I am actually working on a short sequel piece (another request).

Enjoy!

It's been another week of hell; another week of grotesque monsters, some faceless and some with seven heads; another week of children with gifts they shouldn't have, terrible and dangerous. It's vividly familiar, except this time, they're sixteen and their fight has taken them to the Hawkins Public Library.

Drained and very nearly defeated, Mike rests on his haunches, trying to catch his breath and think up a plan. Ducked between the the R and S shelves in fiction, he's leaning a good portion of his weight on a familiar baseball bat that is dark with the blood of otherworldly creatures, questionable chunks of fleshy matter oozing from the nails that stick out of the split wood at odd angles. Beside him, Eleven leans against the tall bookshelf, her breathing heavy, a bloody hammer laying discarded by her feet. It's of no more use to her. Not here.

The remainder of their clan and their improvised weaponry (axes, crowbars, and a particularly handy crossbow) are on the other side of town, in the woods behind Will's house where the barrier between worlds is exceptionally delicate and mutable. That is where the monsters are, mostly beaten and burning away into the night. But Twelve is here, in the library, where El had tracked him to and where Mike had followed her because he would follow her anywhere.

Twelve. The boy who had come after Eleven—her lost brother, the

experiment they had pursued following her “failure.”

Twelve, who was just as powerful as Eleven, but not nearly as good. Twelve, who could touch you and fill your mind with unfathomable horrors.

“Eleven.” An ethereal voice floats through the empty library and Mike can’t tell where it’s coming from because it seems to come from everywhere at once; from all directions and from inside his own head. “Come out and play, Eleven.”

El’s breathing slows down and she pushes herself away from the bookshelf, stretching her arms out in front of her. Mike can hear her knuckles crack as a look of grim determination sets itself on her face, at odds with her pixie-like features.

“I’m going to kill him,” El mutters, unfaltering, remembering Dustin’s horrified screaming from when Twelve had confronted them on the abandoned tracks to days earlier. She pushes her bangs away from her forehead, sticking there with sweat, and begins to stalk down the aisle, books hovering and flying off the shelves as she passes, an aura of furious power consuming her.

“El! Stop!” Mike scrambles to his feet, bat in hand and voice choked. “You can’t!” He leaps towards her, dodging a book that flies past his head, and grabs her hand. As much faith as Mike has in her—as strong as he knows El is—Mike knows that Twelve is stronger, knows that he has been bred for the purpose of destroying her. Mike plants his feet firmly into the carpeted floor and El turns to look at him, pity in her wide, round eyes.

“Please.” He’s not shouting anymore, his voice quivering on the edge of brokenness. His effort to hold back his tears is failing quickly and Mike tastes salt, mingled with the streaked dirt from his cheeks, running over his lips. He squeezes El’s hand tighter, hoping it will keep her tethered to him, to this world.

“Mike,” she whispers, tugging away from him, half-heartedly, but with strength that exceeds his own.

“No,” he breathes as her fingers slip from his, catching the hem of her

sleeve, “I love you.”

“I know.” There’s so much contained there—so much left unspoken behind those words.

I know and I love you too.

I know and I that’s why I have to do this.

I know and thank you for the best five years of my life.

El pulls again and Mike loses his grip on her jacket, falling to his knees. El doesn’t look back at him. Shoulders squared, she walks on. Suddenly, he’s a terrified little boy again, twelve-years-old and in a science classroom, defenceless and able to only watch as a strange yet remarkable girl puts her life on the line to save him.

It’s vividly familiar, except this time he’s sixteen and Mike Wheeler insists on changing the ending. He pushes himself back up, tightening his grip on the bat and hurrying towards El’s retreating figure. He comes up beside her and, with his free hand, takes hers, intertwining their fingers.

“If we’re going down,” he says firmly, “We’re going together.”

Notes for the Chapter:

Many thanks, as always, you all you lovely folks leaving comments and kudos. A special big thanks to Browneyesarker, who always leaves such lovely words for me.

6. The Realization

Summary for the Chapter:

Prompt: In awe, when you first realize it

In the Wheeler's basement, scrawling away at homework and munching on crackers and cheese, a slightly decimated merry band of friends sits around a table that is usually reserved for long hours of Dungeons and Dragons. Mike and Lucas, shoulders together, work on polishing off their Science Lab while Max, with narrowed eyes and pouting lips, is putting together an outline for her essay on *To Kill a Mockingbird*. El diligently makes her way through a page of Algebra problems; now a proud sophomore at Hawkins High, she rarely complains about homework. Absent from their think-tank is Will, home sick with a flu that he had inadvertently given to Dustin, his lab partner (also at home, toasty in his pyjamas).

Just before five o'clock, El solves the last of the problems Mr. Klein had assigned to her class and glances down at her watch. She gently closes her textbook and looks back up at her friends.

"I'm going to go home," she announces, "For Will." Jonathan and Joyce were both scheduled to work that evening and, even though Hopper would likely be dropping by on his way home from the station, El wanted to be at home to watch over Will, just in case he needed anything. Besides that, they had made plans earlier that morning to watch *Star Wars* and drink chamomile tea together.

El begins packing up her things—pencils, notebooks, a calculator, and a glittery pink pen—as Lucas and Max set aside their respective tasks to bid her farewell, Max reaching out to tousle El's otherwise smooth hair.

"Don't forget about the track meet tomorrow," she warns playfully.

"Seven a.m.," El replies with a nod, "Try not to sleep in this time." Max rolls her eyes, but concedes, unable to argue with El's rebuttal—she did have a tendency to be chronically late.

Shouldering her backpack, El waves one last goodbye and walks to the stairs, Mike following along behind her, ignoring the not-so-subtle way Lucas and Max dramatically shield their eyes. At the bottom of the stairs, Mike and El stand facing each other, prolonged exits a normal part of their routine. Mike takes her hand and fiddles with her fingers, wondering at their softness. Looking up, he meets her familiar eyes, eyes that still make his knees practically knock together.

“Well, see you later El,” he mumbles. Mike has a habit of never saying goodbye—not to her. There’s too much finality contained within words, too much history.

“See you tomorrow, Mike,” she replies, a small smile on her lips. Mike thinks catches something like hope dart across her eyes, but passes it off as his imagination.

“Good luck at your track meet,” he says, “I’ll be there early. With Eggos.”

“Thank you,” El grins. A short silence lingers between them and El surveys his face, almost expectantly, though he can’t figure out why.

“Well, see you then,” Mike says with a small wave, the intensity of her gaze sending butterflies fluttering from his stomach to his throat. “Tell Will we said hey.” El nods, her face falling ever so slightly as she turns on her heel and lithely climbs the stairs, leaving Mike with a dumbfounded expression on his face. Had he upset her?

When Mike turns back to Max and Lucas, they are not making their usual taunts—mocked barfing or kissing noises. Rather, their expressions are flat and annoyed. Max has her arms crossed over her chest and Lucas is shaking his head.

“What?” Mike asks, raising his arms defensively. Max and Lucas trade a quick grin, twisting to face each other. Max clutches her hands over her heart and puts on a high-pitched voice.

“Bye Mikey-poo. You’re the best.” Her impression of El is far from accurate, but Mike nevertheless gets the point as she flutters her eyelashes at Lucas, puckering her lips.

“B-b-bye El. I-I-uh-uh-I-uh-I-I-like y-you,” Lucas returns in a mocking voice, his hands splayed nervously across his lap in a perfect rendition of Mike’s body language, causing both his friends to descend into a fit of laughter.

“Shut up guys,” Mike frowns, feeling his face get hot and red as he sinks back into his chair.

“How do you feel about El?” Lucas asks, looking at him, suddenly serious, all traces of laughter gone. Mike, slightly thrown off by the question, looks at Lucas blankly for a moment before answering.

“She’s amazing,” Mike sighs, trying to keep the blush from creeping back up and over his cheeks. Lucas and Max roll their eyes simultaneously, Max uttering a short “duh” under her breath.

“Yes, Mike. We know she’s amazing,” Lucas says earnestly, “But how do you feel about her?”

“She’s just...”

“Oh my god,” Max whines, grabbing a cube of cheddar cheese and tossing it at Mike’s head, “Mike, for a kid with straight As, you are being so dumb. Yes, El is amazing and cool and pretty and whatever else you were going to say. Those are, like, scientific facts—objective, right?” She pauses, looking at Mike emphatically. He nods, not knowing what else to do, while Lucas watches his friends with amusement, secretly loving when Max goes on one of her extended explanations—especially when it’s directed at Mike. “Okay, great,” she continues, “But what about you? How do those facts make you feel? How. Do. YOU. Feel.”

“I...” Mike’s voice trails off and he fixes his eyes on his forgotten Science homework, “Warm, I guess.” Lucas places a hand over his face and shakes his head again and Max laughs.

“You’re in love, dummy,” she says matter-of-factly, turning back to her homework. “Maybe you should let El know sometime.”

Mike’s mouth opens and closes several times, his brain not supplying any words to his tongue. Max, having said her part, ignores his

gaping but Lucas, with raised eyebrows, tosses another cube of cheese in his direction.

“Earth to Michael,” he says, waving his arms in front of Mike’s face. Blinking back to reality, but without a word, Mike scrambles from his chair and takes the basement steps two at a time, hurrying to the front entryway. He’s surprised, but beyond pleased, to see El still there, waiting by the front door, rocking back and forth in her sneakers—this means he won’t have to ride after her on his bike and be even more out of breath when delivering his confession.

“Your mom offered to drive me home,” she explains, anticipating his question, “She’s made some soup for Will.”

“Uh-huh,” Mike mumbles absently, focusing on not tripping over his own feet as he approaches her.

“Mike?” El looks at him sideways, taking in his pale face and rosy cheeks, his glossy eyes and the beads of sweat forming under his hair, his heavy breathing. “Are you getting a flu?”

“What?” Mike looks up at her in shock, eyes wide, “No! No. I’m fine. It’s just that...” Now that he’s facing her, less than a foot away, he can’t quite pluck up the courage that had beset his heart as he bounded up the stairs. Mike swallows, looking at Eleven with admiration, amazed that she somehow found his way into his life and decided to stay there.

“Yes?” El says softly, urging him continue, the concern not yet fully gone from her eyes.

“It’s just that I didn’t say...downstairs...I should have...well...I...El, I lo—”

“Michael?” His mother’s voice rings out from behind him and he blanches, turning to look at her over his shoulder, eyes wider than a deer in the headlights. Karen, a red-lidded Tupperware full of her hearty chicken noodle soup in hand and sunglasses propped up on her head, takes one look at her son’s expression and a knowing grin breaks out over her lips.

"I'm sorry," she gives a mocking gasp, "Am I interrupting something?"

"Mooom," Mike groans, mortified—was everyone trying to make him die of embarrassment today? Karen raises her eyebrows at her son, shrugging once before bustling away.

"El, I'll be in the car, sweetie," she calls out over her shoulder as they listen to her leave through the side door.

"Sorry," Mike mumbles, turning back to El. She shrugs, not entirely sure what Mike is apologizing for and, eager to not keep Karen waiting very long, leans forward, quickly kissing the freckles that dot his cheek.

"See you."

Mike's hand immediately goes up to his cheek, an infatuated expression washing over his features, still awed by the feeling of her kisses.

"IloveyouEl," he blurts out quickly. She pauses, hand frozen on the doorknob. Amidst cheers and laughter from the slightly ajar basement door—the prying eyes of friends peeking out at them—El turns back to him, cheeks red and lips smiling.

7. The Cottage

Summary for the Chapter:

Prompt: When I'm Dead

Notes for the Chapter:

chuckles

I like this one a lot.

A picnic basket, a beach ball, several towels, a stereo, and a day's worth of snacks efficiently packed into the trunk of his car, Steve is nearing the end of a two-and-a-half-hour drive northwest of Hawkins, to his family's cottage along Hart Lake. He's drumming along against his steering wheel, albeit poorly, with John Bonham to "Moby Dick" and chatting with his pint-sized passenger in the backseat.

El, gripped with excitement, eagerly batters him with questions about their destination—it's colours, its smells, its sounds. Steve, amused by her delight, answers each question happily while the Wheeler siblings, both heavy sleepers, remain blissfully unaware of their surroundings; Nancy beside him, with her face pressed up against the glass of the passenger window and Mike with his head resting on El's shoulder.

"It sounds beautiful," El sighs dreamily, having finally exhausted her list of questions. She's loved the beach since her first time visiting on earlier that summer and is thrilled to be visiting one that is, for her, far away—the furthest she's ever been from home.

"Really beautiful," Steve responds with a smile, taking a quick glance at El through the rear-view mirror. She's sitting perfectly still so as not to disturb the sleeping boy using her as a pillow, her face turned and looking eagerly out the window at the passing countryside. "It's my favourite place in the world," Steve tells her. Admittedly, he hasn't seen much of the world, but Hart Lake was spectacular regardless of that—a large beach of pale sand and an immense cedar-lined lake, at the center of which sits a sizable outcropping of rock.

El's face lights up at Steve's mention of the word favourite. This she knows to be a good thing—the best of any one thing—and if Hart Lake has that status, it must be truly special. El, too, had recently started collecting favourites, of which she kept a written list in the sparkly purple notebook Mike had given her on her “first” birthday. She had a favourite animal (the polar bear), a favourite food (pizza with pepperoni and mushrooms), a favourite colour (blue), and a favourite book (*A Wrinkle in Time*). She also had a favourite person (Mike Wheeler).

Just after eight o'clock, Steve pulls up beside the old-fashioned log cabin and El excitedly wakes the other passengers with gentle prods in the ribs. The morning passes quickly, spent unpacking the car, playing volleyball, and building a sandcastle, complete with a popsicle stick drawbridge. At noon, they pause for lunch, Steve gobbling up an almost inhuman number of ham sandwiches and Nancy rebraiding El's hair and helping her reapply sunscreen.

“Mike,” Nancy calls out to her brother as he munches from a bag of sour cream and onion chips, “Your face is burning.” She tosses him the bottle of sunscreen and Mike, all too aware of his penchant for becoming tomato red, rushes to reapply the goop to his freckled cheeks. Tossing aside the bottle, Mike leaps from his spot on the blanket, chip crumbs falling from his lap.

“I'll race you to the rocks,” Mike grins, the challenge delivered to El. She glances up at him with eyebrows knitted together, taking in the white streaks of sunscreen lining his face.

“Jim says I'm supposed to wait twenty minutes,” she replies, shaking her head.

“Don't worry about it, El,” Steve laughs, cracking open a bottle of Coke, “That's just a myth.”

“Myth?” El purses her lips and looks towards Steve, “I don't know that word yet.”

“It's like a story,” Mike chimes in, rocking on the balls of his feet, “Almost like *Lord of the Rings*. It means we can go in the water and not worry.”

“Oh,” El’s face clears and immediately she’s up and running towards him, then past him. Despite her much shorter legs—the fact that every two of her strides is only one of his, she’s quick. Mike laughs, quickening his pace to catch up with her, kicking up sand in his wake. He’s going to let her win, of course, but he needs to put on a good performance of effort.

El reaches the water first and hesitates a few steps in, just as the cold water splashes around her knees, allowing Mike to rush past her, into the green-tinged lake. Fifteen feet out he stops and shouts back at her encouragingly.

“C’mon!” Mike calls out, “Water’s warm!”

“Friends don’t lie, Mike!” El calls back, causing him to laugh. The phrase has become less of a truthful axiom and more of a sardonic joke as they’ve aged from twelve to almost fourteen. El shakes her head and inches further into the lake slowly, ignoring the feeling of weeds squelching beneath her toes.

With a mischievous smirk, Mike bounds back to her, splashing far more than necessary. El attempts—and fails—to shield herself, and chooses retaliation instead, mustering her powers to send a small wave crashing towards Mike with just enough force to knock him off balance and send him under the surface. He comes up, sputtering for air, a moment later and pushes a curtain of sopping hair away from his eyes.

“No fair,” Mike makes a hurt face, though his playful grin betrays his amusement.

“Race now?” El smiles toothily up at him. A moment of competitive silence passes between them before they charge forward, towards the rocks that rest of the very center of the lake.

It’s not much of a race, as Mike is sure to stay by El’s side until falling behind at the very last moment, allowing her to climb up onto the warm grey surface of the makeshift island while he remains treading in the water.

“You win,” he grins goofily up at her, awed by the halo of afternoon

sunlight that streams down around El.

“You let me,” she states matter-of-factly, never missing a beat. Mike shrugs nonchalantly.

“I’m going to swim a few laps,” Mike tells her, “Care to join?” El shakes her head.

“I’ll watch,” she says quietly.

“Suit yourself.” Mike gives her a quick wink before dipping backwards into the water with a joyful whoop. El smiles to herself, a warm feeling on her cheeks. Watching Mike is one of her favourite things to do. She used to keep her eyes peeled on him for the purposes of learning but these days she finds that, having learned so much, she simply enjoys watching him smile. Absently, she dips her finger into the lake, drawing patterns on the surface of the rock—mostly curved lines and flowers—waiting for them to dry and fade away before beginning again.

Just as she traces the petals on her fifth flower, El hears Mike pull himself up and out of the water behind her. She turns just in time to catch the slightly pained expression on his face as he sinks down to the hard surface of the rocks and lays back, stretching his long legs out. She can see his chest heaving and scoots over to him hurriedly.

“I’m dying,” Mike gasps out, eyes closed, “I’m dead.” El’s shoulders tense and she places a hand over his shoulder.

“Sick?” she asks, her voice high, always reverting to single syllables when she’s worried.

“No,” Mike assures her with a small guffaw of laughter, “I just got a stupid cramp in my leg.” Immediately, El’s shoulders relax, though she still feels a lump in her throat.

“Because we ate.” Her voice comes out flat, not in the lighthearted manner she intended.

“Yeah, yeah,” Mike rolls his eyes and props himself up on his elbows, leaning in her direction and shaking out his hair before laying down again.

El shifts so that she is laying down next to him, less than half a foot away. She stares up at the thick clouds rolling in from the east, previously unnoticed. One looks like a dragon, if she squints, and another something like an elephant with two trunks. It was Will who had taught her to see shapes in the clouds, one afternoon in the Byers's yard while they sat on the grass eating peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. Still, the whimsical shapes she strains to locate cannot distract her from a more pressing, a more terrifying thought. She turns her gaze back to Mike wiggles ever so slightly closer to him.

"Please don't die Mike," she whispers, her face now no more than an inch from his. Mike opens his eyes and almost laughs at the earnest, wide-eyed expression he had no idea was so close to him. But the laughter dies in his throat at the sight of tears welling behind El's eyes, the wavering of her poignant expression. He remembers, all at once, that she's seen and done things he'd never understand—that death, for El, is something entirely different than it is for him.

"Don't worry," Mike grins, patting her arm awkwardly, "I'll be around for a long time. You'll get to see me when I'm an old man, like the Chief."

"We'll be old together?" El snuffles slightly, "Promise?" This, unlike friends don't lie, has never lost its sense of import.

"Yeah," Mike grins, brushing his thumb against her cheek to wipe away a few stray tears, "I promise. You okay?"

"Yes," she says with a small smile, calmer. Mike pushes a stray strand of hair away from her face and surveys her features for a long moment.

"You're great El," he says finally, face growing warm as he notices her eyes dart quickly to his lips before returning to his eyes. He contemplates closing the gap between them and kissing her, softly and carefully and quickly, as all his kisses are, but she speaks, her voice like music to his ears.

"You too, Mike. You're my favourite."

"You're my favourite too El."

They're both sure it goes beyond that, but El is not sure how to articulate such a feeling just yet and Mike isn't quite ready to do so. As they silently enjoy one another's company—Mike thinking ahead to his grand plan for finally telling El he loves her and El thinking of changing her favourite colour to the deep shade of brown that is Mike's eyes—it begins to rain. Light drops, almost mist, fall over them as a large cloud travels across the sun, not blocking it out entirely. Mild yellow rays poke through its soft grey edges, the rest of the sky still a dazzling blue. It's the most beautiful thing El has ever seen—rain falling and sun shining together.

Together, El thinks, Like the way we'll grow old.

8. The Lesson

Summary for the Chapter:

Prompt: A whisper in the ear

Notes for the Chapter:

Sorry for the angst! Next one will be more fluff than you can handle, I promise! Thanks to all those leaving comments—I love to hear your thoughts <3

February had always seemed to be the coldest, cruellest month in Hawkins. Perhaps it was the exhaustion of its residents, tired of the biting wind and eager for the warm glow of spring sunlight, aching to see the bright green of fresh grass once more. Or perhaps it was the fury of a season in its death throes, defiantly making its last stand against the inevitable forward momentum of the year.

This particular February had been especially cold for Mike Wheeler. It brought a chill with it that did more than sting his cheeks and chap his lips. This was a cold that settled deep into his bones, into the very core of his being and, if truth be told, it was more than just the weather keeping him huddled under his blankets on Saturday mornings instead of pulling on his boots for the quick walk over to Lucas's for bacon, eggs, and cartoons.

It had been eighty-three days since El's departure—each marked by a large, harsh red X on the calendar he kept tucked away under his bed. Mike believed himself to be the only person aware of this calendar, but there was one other person who had laid eyes on those jagged red marks, each one like a plunge into cold water, knowing that they were all for her, a quantifiable measurement of the hurt she was causing the boy who had been so kind to her.

Despite this, Eleven could not return to him; it wasn't safe for her to do so. So, she stayed in a place colder than a Hawkins February, darker than a night without stars. It was a place where she fought to keep herself alive and to keep the world she had so briefly known as beautiful safe from the monsters that would otherwise destroy it.

And though she was strong, she did not have the will to stay away entirely, visiting Mike whenever she could, unseen, from the place she called the In-Between. There, she could watch him, listen to his voice, though she could not reach out and touch him.

It was in this way that Eleven learned about love.

In December, she had watched the Wheelers gathered around their Christmas tree, decorated with so many beautiful colours, though conspicuously absent of lights. She watched with a warm smile as Mike's little sister unwrapped a pretty blonde doll in a bright pink box, squealing with delight. She watched as the small girl hugged her brother and pressed her lips to his freckled cheeks.

"I love you Mikey!"

In January, she had watched as Mike's mother sat quietly on the edge of his bed well he slept, her forehead creased with worry and her eyes tired. She watched as this woman, with a maternal tenderness she longed to experience, leaned over and delicately kissed her son's forehead.

"I love you, Michael."

In February, on the evening of the eighty-third day she watches as Nancy and Mike sit on the front porch, huddled together in the freezing air, talking about her—whispering her name in hushed tones. She watches, heart splitting, as Nancy wraps an arm around Mike's shoulder and holds back her own tears, wanting to remain strong for her baby brother.

"Love you Mike. Things are going to get better."

From the Wheelers, Eleven learns what it means to love—to love unconditionally and without end. She had cared so deeply for Mike, and watching him from a place so close, yet still a world away, has taught her a new word that she grasps at in the darkness and shadows that have come to define her existence.

And so, on the eighty-fourth day following her disappearance, El decides to reach out for the first time. Tired and emaciated as she is,

knees buckling and dirt stained, she visits Mike while he sits on the sofa in his basement reading a book with a dragon on its cover. She stands over his shoulder and stares at his hands, pale and soft, as they turn the pages of his book. Leaning forward, she whispers in his ear, gone the next instant.

“I love you Mike.”

A shiver running down his spine, Mike momentarily looks up, the hairs on the back of his neck standing on end. He reaches out and grabs at the blanket folded on the other side of the sofa, wrapping it around his shoulders before returning to his book.

9. The Cliff

Summary for the Chapter:

Prompt: Loud so that everyone can hear

Red and orange leaves swirl in the cool autumn breeze as Mike and El plod through the forest on their way home from school, their sneakered feet crunching against the dead foliage that coats the ground. El's soft humming—of a song that Mike can't quite place—fills in the gaps of silence between the wind whistling through bare tree branches and the chirping of birds.

They're halfway home when, suddenly, El stops in her tracks, turning to look at Mike. She's still adjusting to finally having caught up to him in height and she meets his dark perpetually attentive eyes with her own smirking ones, a mischievous fire burning behind their honey-brown softness.

"You're it," she whispers, poking him in the ribs. Without warning, El takes off running, her backpack bouncing against her purple windbreaker with each long stride, ponytail flying out behind her. It takes a moment for Mike, wide-eyed and taken aback, to process the situation; a moment for his feet to catch up with his brain, before he takes off after her, calling her name and laughing.

El runs quickly, without thinking, wherever her feet take her. She giggles breathlessly at the sound of Mike chasing along behind her and, every few moments, peeks over her shoulder to confirm how much of a lead she holds. Not paying attention to her direction, El runs full speed into a familiar clearing, her heart clenching as she skids to a sudden halt. She knows this place, has nightmares about it more often than she'd admit—about Mike falling and her not being strong enough to lift him back up, to stop him from hitting the water with a sickening splash. Those nightmares are the reason why she hasn't come back here since that day when, years ago and in a tattered pink dress she broke a bully's arm. She's always found a way around this place, an alternate route. But today her feet had betrayed her and led her here.

When Mike finally catches up to her, far more out of shape than he'd care to say, she's standing by the edge of the cliff, looking out over the water. El's back faces him, but he can see the tension in her shoulders, the stiffness of her legs. Out of breath and chest heaving, Mike wants to lean over and recover, but the sight her pushes his own burning lungs from his mind.

"El?" he says softly, coming up behind her. He catches sight of her face, an unreadable mask.

"You're lucky I was there," El mumbles under her breath, ponytail half undone and hair whipping around her exposed cheeks. She's chewing her bottom lip, the way she always does when troubled.

"I know," Mike replies, looking down at his feet and shuffling closer to her side, "I'm sorry I ever did that to you."

"You were being brave," she says, rolling her eyes ever so slightly, "Brave but stupid." It had certainly surprised her, when she was a girl, to see Mike step off that ledge so casually. But as she had grown to know him, El realized that this act of selfless bravery and total sacrifice wasn't surprising at all. Mike was, after all, the boy who had hid her away from grown men with guns; the boy who had ridden his bike straight towards a speeding van. That she had always been there—that she would always be there—to remedy his reckless behaviour was a given.

"Want to hear something cool?" he asks, reaching for her hand and squeezing it gently in his own, just once. El looks at him with raised eyebrows and nods once, returning his single squeeze with two of her own in quick succession—a secret code developed when they were fourteen and never forgotten.

With a lopsided grin, Mike pulls his hand free, bringing both hands up to his face and cupping them around his mouth. He draws in a deep breath and shouts as loud as he can muster.

"I LOVE EL HOPPER!"

His voice rings out over the open water, breaking the stillness of the crisp air, before reverberating back from the rocks on the other side

of the quarry. His expression of love, shouted loud enough for all of Hawkins to hear, falls back onto their ears ten times over. El's face lights up into an immense, toothy smile. Giggling, she mimics Mike's actions, hands against her face, and shouts out into the void space.

"I LOVE MIKE WHEELER!"

As those words echo back to them, Mike takes El's hand and, again, squeezes softly, just once. He receives, again, two short squeezes in return—a secret code for a not-so-secret feeling.

Notes for the Chapter:

This is probably one of my favourite pieces, out of all the things that I've written. I hope you enjoy it and that it brings you some joy on this otherwise pretty dismal day.

10. The Ribbon

Summary for the Chapter:

Prompt: Muffled, from the other side of the door.

Notes for the Chapter:

Hello all! I really appreciate all the kind comments you've been leaving! I hope you enjoy this little bit of fluff. It's kind of ridiculous, but it is absolutely one of my favourites—if not my number 1. Let me know what you think! Cheers <3

El Hopper had a big problem—a problem that was staring back at her from the mirror over the bathroom sink. She bit her bottom lip in agitation, face scrunched up in concern as she glanced down at the metal scissors in her hand and then back up to the uneven mess of bangs drooping over her forehead reflected in the mirror. Sighing, El thought of the numerous times Karen Wheeler had trimmed her hair, making it look so effortless. She had always watched so carefully, paid such close attention to the way that Karen's hands twisted and flipped around her head with grace and ease. El had assumed—apparently incorrectly—that she would be able to mimic those actions.

While debating whether to continue on with her actions (there was, after all, no way this could possibly be any worse) or to stop and admit defeat, El heard a soft knocking on the bathroom door accompanied by her adoptive father's voice, tinged with worry.

“El, are you alright in there?” Jim asked, his face unknowingly matching the concerned countenance of the girl on the other side of the door, “It's been almost an hour.” Now, Jim Hopper had known very little—practically nothing—about raising a teenage girl when he had welcomed one into his life just over a year ago. But, he considered himself to be a fast learner and even he knew that one hour in the bathroom warranted some checking up on.

“Yes.” El's voice sounded from inside the bathroom and Jim could

hear the anxious timbre of her words. “Yes. I’m fine.”

“Okay,” Jim sighed, not believing her for a moment, “Mike’s going to be here soon so maybe you can come help me make some popcorn?” He knew about his daughter’s fondness for Mike Wheeler—it was impossible not to see if you spent more than thirty seconds in a room with them—and he hoped that mentioning the boy would draw her out of her hiding.

“No,” El said, barely louder than a mouse, “Sorry.” Jim frowned at her response. No luck. Pursing his lips, he tracked over to the phone, ready to call Joyce for advice. If this was something girl-related, some puberty thing, it was probably best to get a woman over here as soon as possible—despite being a quick learner, there were certain things Jim didn’t quite feel confident teaching to his daughter. But just as he dialled the fourth digit to Joyce’s familiar phone number, Jim heard the bathroom door creak open and turned to see El peeking her head out from the small room, face intently focused on the ground. He placed the phone back in the receiver in a hurry.

“There you are,” Jim grinned, “I thought you fell...”

His joke died in his throat as El looked up at him with her big doe-eyes, at that moment filled with regret, and Jim found himself working hard to suppress the guffaw of laughter that threatened to escape his lips. The front portion of her hair was cut jagged, at bizarre angles, and a large tress seemed to be missing entirely from just above her left ear.

“Jim,” she whispered, clearly distraught, her bottom lip quivering. He had to quickly move a hand over his face in order to hide the smirk rapidly forming on his lips, rubbing his fingers over the bridge of his nose in an effort to seem less amused and more troubled by her misadventure.

“Oh, El,” he sighed, “What did you do?”

El didn’t have a chance to respond before the doorbell rang out, its chiming bringing tears to her eyes. Jim watched as El turned to look at the door, her eyes wide with horror, as though the ringing had announced the arrival of some supernatural monster instead of sweet,

unassuming Mike Wheeler—the boy whose name filled pages of the diary Jim had once *accidentally* peeked at.

“I can’t,” El’s voice quaked and she scurried back to the bathroom without another sound. Upon hearing the click of the lock behind her, Jim knew it was safe to laugh, answering the door with that laughter still etched on his face.

“Hello Chief,” Mike said immediately after the door was opened for him. He stared pointedly up at the imposing man in the doorway, trying his hardest to maintain eye contact. For a moment, Jim contemplated sending Mike away so that he could deal with calming El down, but the earnest expression on the kid’s face and big bouquet of flowers he had clutched in front of him swayed the Chief’s course of action. It was Valentine’s Day after all. With a small nod, Jim gestured for Mike to enter the house.

“These are for El,” Mike said, his voice cracking with obvious nervousness as he stepped past the older man. Jim could see his hands practically shaking at the stem of the bouquet.

“They’re nice,” he commented dryly, “You should give them to her.”

“Right,” Mike flushed, trying a small chuckle that came out sounding more like a squeak. He had been afraid of the Chief before El, intimidated by the sheer size of the man and the perpetually grumpy look written on his features, but now that everyone knew about his crush on El, now that he was here to watch a movie with her on Valentine’s Day, his terror knew no limits. “Where is she?” Mike asked, nearly buckling under the effort of keeping his voice steady.

“Listen Wheeler,” Jim put a hand on his shoulder pretended not to notice the way Mike’s body stiffened immediately, “She, uh, she gave herself a bad haircut and she’s pretty upset so I’m gonna go talk with her if you wa—”

“I can do it,” Mike blurted out, not meaning to interrupt the Chief, but unable to stop the words from tumbling out of his lips.

“You sure, kid?” Jim raised his eyebrows at him and Mike nodded emphatically. With a shrug, Jim pointed to the bathroom door, still

shut tight and watched as Mike crept along the hall, bouquet still in hand, knocking gently against the wooden frame.

“Hey El? It’s me. It’s Mike.”

At the sound of Mike’s muffled voice coming through the door, El looked up from her spot, seated on the closed toilet bowl with her knees drawn up to her chest, eyes red and puffy. She hated having to cancel her plans with Mike, hoping that he’d understand.

“Hi Mike,” she said softly, “No movie today. Sorry.”

“Oh c’mon, El,” Mike urged her, pressing his face against the door, “The Chief told me what happened. It can’t be that bad.”

Grimacing, El walked over to the door and unlocked it. She could hear Mike stepping back, awaiting her exit and opened the door ever so slightly, ever so briefly, looking at him with eyes full of sorrow and shame before slamming the door closed in his face, leaving Mike with his mouth hanging open—it *was* a pretty bad haircut, but Mike wasn’t about to let that ruin their date.

“El,” he whispered impassionedly through the door, ignoring the Chief’s eyes, burning on the back of his neck from down the hall. “It’s great, don’t worry!” Mike paused, trying to think of a way to make her feel better, to let her know that he didn’t care about her hair at all; that he only cared about watching whatever movie she wanted to watch and tossing popcorn in the air only to catch it with his mouth—a trick that she loved. “El, I promise. I promise it doesn’t matter! I love y—it!” Mike blanched, a hand coming up to cover his mouth as he mentally berated himself for that near-slip. “I love it. Your hair, I mean. It uh, it looks, uh, fine and...”

Mike’s words of encouragement falling on her ears, El looked up at the door and wiped at her nose, dripping from her leftover tears. Using her powers, she opened the door—this time, fully—and Mike entered, standing in the threshold with a large bouquet of flowers she had not noticed moments earlier.

“Friends don’t lie,” she sighed, her eyes floating over Mike’s face. He grinned at her and shook his head firmly.

"I'm not lying," he insisted, setting the bouquet down over the sink, "I think you'd look pretty no matter what. But, if you really don't like it, we can get Nancy to come over after her date with Steve and fix it. But until then..." Mike let his voice trail off as he untied the red ribbon at the base of the bouquet and handed it to El. "You can use this to keep your bangs back."

He watched, entranced, as El looped the ribbon into her hair and made quick work of tying a large bow on top of her head. When she had finished, she looked up at him with hope filling her eyes.

"You look pretty," Mike whispered, mouth dry, "Really pretty."

11. The Braces

Summary for the Chapter:

Prompt: When we lay together on the fresh spring grass

Notes for the Chapter:

So some of you may have noticed that for a few hours there was some other user's name attached to this story. I somehow added a co-author (a user I've never spoken to) to this story—oops! Thanks to Ao3 tech support for teaching me how to undo my idiocy. I am the only author of this story. Cheers!

Also please enjoy this mindless fluff & thanks for your love <3

El wakes early on Saturday morning and, with a chocolate-coloured blanket wrapped loosely around her shoulders, watches two episodes of The New Scooby-Doo Mysteries, humming along to the familiar theme song over a bowl of Fruit Loops. She had taken advantage of Jim still being asleep, using the opportunity to float the bright red box of sugary cereal down from the highest cupboard in their small kitchen, glad to be free (for one morning, at least) of the bland taste of Cheerios. Throughout the cartoon, as she crunches happily on her cereal, El's mind wanders to Mike; to his frighteningly accurate impression of Scooby that never fails to make her laugh and is, in her opinion, much better than his attempts at Yoda.

Once she's slurped the leftover milk out from the bottom of her cereal bowl, El makes quick work of washing her used kitchenware and setting up the coffee maker, flicking it on to brew before she returns to her bedroom—painted pink and with white flowers stencilled on the walls—to change out of her pyjamas into a pair of jeans and her favourite shirt, a soft purple blouse that she had received as a gift from Nancy the past Christmas. Checking herself over once in the mirror, a hint of a smile graces her lips and she darts into Jim's bedroom across the hall, suddenly all haste. With no attempts at

subtlety, El begins to shake him awake, her actions quick-paced and her prods impatient. Jim, always the heaviest of sleepers, shifts slightly but does not wake.

“Jim,” she whines, continuing her shaking, “It’s ten o’clock. You promised!” She watches intently as her adoptive father’s eyes slowly flutter open, lids still heavy with sleep. El is in his face immediately, a grin on her lips as she watches him yawn, mouth a cavern of teeth.

“Remember when you used to talk less, kiddo?” Jim groans, grabbing a pillow and lightly bopping her over the head with it. El giggles, undeterred, and pulls the pillow from his hands.

“Please,” she beams at him, fixing him with the wholehearted smile she knows he can’t resist. “I put the coffee on,” she adds proudly, a hint of deviousness in her voice. Jim’s ears perk up and, still grumbling, he shoos her out of the room.

Jim had begun, many months ago, to anticipate El’s impatience on Saturdays, though usually it would come closer to noon. Saturday afternoons were, as always, reserved for going to the Wheeler’s house to meet with her friends. El had, however, solemnly sat down over dinner last night to explain why she needed to go to Mike’s early today. She wants—so she had told him—to get there early, before Dustin and Will and Lucas, because she hasn’t seen Mike since Monday, before he went to the orthodontist for his braces. Because last night, when she went to dinner at the Byers’s house, Mike hadn’t been there. Because she had become quite worried when Lucas told her that Mike was still in pain from having braces put on his teeth. Jim swore to himself, up and down, that this petite girl with a big smile and bright, expressive eyes would eventually be the death of him.

Spring had arrived in Hawkins comparatively early that year, with the snow of a harsh winter completely melted away by the end of February. Two months later, nearing the end of April, winter was a distant memory; the weather had turned warm, a light breeze rustling in the newly grown leaves, the sky a brilliant shade of blue and dotted with the fluffiest white clouds, the flowers in full bloom, tulips

of every colour lining the Wheeler's driveway as El, in her canvas sneakers and with a light jacket thrown over her shoulders, practically skips towards the front door, waving goodbye to Jim in his cruiser before ringing on the doorbell.

She hears someone shouting briefly on the other side of the door before Karen opens it wide, a sunflower-patterned apron tied around her waist and streaked with flour. The aroma of something sweet, commonplace in the Wheeler household, wafts down the hall as El is welcomed inside, curling up around her nostrils and making her stomach rumble.

"Good morning, El," Karen greets her, opening her arms for a hug that El accepts without hesitation—Karen gives the best hugs, tender and gentle, yet surprisingly firm.

"Hi Mrs. Wheeler," El smiles into this warm gesture of welcome, "Is Mike home?" She can't mask the eagerness in her voice and Karen releases her with a bright smile, nodding and pointing down the hall.

"He's in the backyard, sweetie" Karen informs her, "But he's not feeling very talkative today."

With a softly murmured word of thanks, El cautiously ambles down the Wheeler's hallway, towards the double glass doors that lead out to the backyard—a familiar route for her. Once outside again, she catches sight of Mike sprawled out across the lawn on his back, a book propped open over his chest, his dark hair in striking contrast to the emerald green hue of the Wheeler's perfectly manicured and recently trimmed grass. He doesn't seem to notice as she softly crosses the yard, only appearing to realize her presence when her shadow falls over the small print on the pages of his book.

"Hi Mike," she greets him quietly, settling into the grass beside him, crossing her legs underneath her. Mike waves, his eyes bright, though he remains silent as he carefully folds down the corner of his page and sets his book down. His lips are drawn tightly together, expressionless, and this bothers El, who has grown accustomed to the glowing smile that lights up Mike's face whenever she comes over. A beat of silence lingers between them, El tucking a stray piece of short hair behind her newly pierced ears. Mike pushes himself up into a

seated position, his shoulders becoming level with El's eyes.

"Do they hurt you?" El asks tentatively, her fingers nervously fiddling with the buttons on her jean jacket, now heaped into her lap. Mike looks at her and nods, his big eyes filled with something like shame.

"It's a little weird," he says, his voice soft and muffled through lips that barely open, "I'm still getting used to them."

"You didn't smile," El tells him softly, "When I got here."

"It hurts to," Mike confesses, grinning and wincing simultaneously. He feels a stab of pain, not only in his mouth, but also through his chest, knowing that his reticence over the past week has likely hurt El's feelings. "It hurts to eat too, kind of," Mike continues, hoping to make her understand that his radio silence has nothing—well, almost nothing—to do with her. "My mom's been making me a bunch of soup." As Mike speaks, El nods gently, catching sight of the new metal wires over his teeth. She purses her lips, worried at how uncomfortable it looks, and resists the urge to reach out and touch his lips.

"Well," El says, "Your mom's soup tastes good."

"That's true," Mike grins. El returns his smile and another beat of silence passes between them, though this one is not so tense. Calmed, El splays her legs out in front of her and falls back into the grass, the short blades tickling the back of her neck as she closes her eyes and basks in the warmth of the sun hitting her face. Beside her, Mike follows suite, laying down and interlocking his fingers behind his head into a makeshift pillow. They pass several moments in this peaceful state before Mike's hand reaches out for her own, his fingers tapping out a gently rhythm on her open palm.

"Mike?" El's voice floats over the cool breeze and into his ears. Mike cracks one eye open to look at her and notices that she's suddenly looking at him intensely, as she always does when there's a burning question on her mind.

"Yepp?"

“Can we still...kiss?”

Mike feels a surge of relief wash over him and he lets out a bark of laughter, receiving a sharp pang through his gums as punishment. Still, the pain does nothing to dampen the weightless feeling now spreading through his chest. He had, admittedly, been afraid that El would not want to kiss him anymore, would no longer want him to sneak small, quick pecks to her lips while the boys were clambering up the stairs after a campaign or intently focused on a movie, perhaps bickering over whether Han Solo or Indiana Jones would win in a fight.

“Yeah, definitely,” Mike says, his cheeks ablaze, “Just maybe not for a while.”

“Good,” she whispers, a soft pink lighting up her cheeks as well making Mike slightly envious—it hardly seemed fair that her blushing was so subtle when he became a tomato whenever El looked in his direction.

“Can I tell you something, El?” Mike asks, his eyes moving to stare at the grass, the redness in his cheeks continuing to deepen, despite his best efforts. El nods, propping herself up on her elbow. “I was kind of afraid you would think I was gross or something. That’s why I’ve been staying home and not coming to the phone and stuff. I’m sorry for being so dumb.”

El remains quiet for a moment, watching him with an arched eyebrow until he looks up at her, contrition written all over his features. Rolling her eyes, El reaches over and gently pinches his arm. “You’re a mouthbreather, Mike Wheeler.” With a smirk, she rolls over onto her stomach and props her chin up on her elbows. “But you’re still pretty.”

“Thanks El,” Mike smiles at her with closed lips. In one quick motion, she rolls toward him and plants a delicate kiss on the tip of his nose.

“I love your face, Mike,” she grins. Mike beams at her, and even though it hurts his mouth, it’s worth it to see the smile on her face.

12. The Song

Summary for the Chapter:

Prompt: In a song

“I like this song,” El declares, happily humming along to the beat of Toto’s *Africa*. She’s seated cross-legged on Nancy’s bed, a long, pastel purple skirt tucked up underneath her legs. Nancy’s soft hands delicately caress her own as the older girl, with practiced precision, carefully applies a coat of bright pink nail polish for her.

“Me too,” Nancy replies, smiling up at El with a twinkle in her eyes. “It’s actually our song—mine and Steve’s.” She dips the brush into the small pink bottle, tapping off excess polish before moving on to the second coat.

“Your song?” El echoes, perplexed, keeping her hands still and splayed across her lap, “You made it?” She wrinkles her nose up in confusion. El had heard Steve singing before, in the car when he had volunteered to drive her and Mike to the movies, and he certainly didn’t sound like the man whose voice was floating into her ears from the radio on Nancy’s dresser. Steve wasn’t that good. In fact, he wasn’t very good at all.

“No,” Nancy laughs, partly at the bemused expression on El’s face and partly because she is unable to stop herself from thinking about Steve’s atonal singing voice. “It’s a figure of speech. It just means that this song is really important to me and Steve, as a couple.”

“Oh,” El nods, beginning to understand, “Different than a favourite?”

“Yeah, different than a favourite,” Nancy confirms, wiping away a stray drop of polish from El’s index finger. “Steve picked this song because it’s one of the first we listened to together. My favourite song is still *Sweet Dreams*.”

“I like that one too,” El nods enthusiastically as Nancy finishes applying the second layer of polish to her nails. “Jonathan plays it for me all the time.”

“He’s a good big brother,” Nancy smiles, “Now, just wait here while that dries. I’m going to get us some tea and then I’ll put the top coat on, okay?” She stands and smooths out the wrinkles in her sweater. Just as Nancy is turning to leave the room, her hand on the doorknob, El’s voice sounds out over the music, now a Bowie song.

“Can I have a song?” El asks, her curiosity piqued, “With Mike?”

“Of course,” Nancy answers with a smirk, glancing at El over her shoulder. “You could surprise him by picking one out.”

“I have something for you,” El says quickly, the words hurrying from her mouth just as the Wheeler’s front door swings open to reveal Mike, wearing a bright smile and a striped sweater that will eventually find its way to El’s closet. In a single, swift motion, she pulls a black rectangular object out of her coat pocket and shoves it into Mike’s hands before her fingers, now embellished with chipped, week-old pink polish, move to fiddling anxiously with her zipper. She watches intently as Mike glances down at the small tape deposited into his grasp then back up at her with a questioning expression in his dark eyes.

“It’s a song,” she tells him, a faint blush spreading over her cheeks, coat zipper crunching loudly as she moves it up and down in an absent flurry. Mike reaches a hand out and places it over hers, stilling her erratic movement and looking at her with an eyebrow playfully arched. El was always bringing him little gifts—usually flowers she had collected in the woods behind the Byers’s place or else experiments she had concocted in their kitchen (like the now infamous apple chocolate chip cupcakes), but this tape was a new sort of gift and he was admittedly very curious.

“Just one?” Mike asks, smirking devilishly. Pulling his hand back, he dramatically lifts the tape to eye level, acting at inspecting every inch of it through narrowed eyes, gently shaking it twice with exaggerated motions before El rolls her eyes, swatting at his arm in exasperation at his antics. Mike laughs and gestures for her to come inside, closing the door behind her.

“Want to go downstairs and listen to it?” he asks, noting the excitement in his own voice. El nods as she kicks off her sneakers and shrugs out of her jacket, handing it to Mike, who carefully hangs it in the closet. As she follows him down into the basement, El feels her hands grow clammy and tries to steady her nerves, trying to be subtle as she wipes her palms over her faded jeans.

Four nights ago, she had asked Jonathan for a special favour the moment she had excitedly bounced into his car when he picked her up from the Wheeler’s, nails freshly painted—a mixtape, pretty please, one with all the best songs from 1983. El had been pleasantly surprised to see Jonathan grin smugly and gesture towards the glove compartment, informing her that he had long been in the habit of putting together such a tape at the end of every year. And so, El had spent the greater portion of three days listening to the tape until Jonathan teasingly warned her she was going to wear it out, trying to decide which song reminded her most of Mike.

Flopping down on the couch, El tucks her knees up into her chest and watches as Mike slips the tape into the cassette player resting atop a stack of rarely used puzzles. She hopes she made the right decision.

Mike presses play and waits for the static to transition into the opening notes of whatever song is contained on this mystery tape. Soft, familiar notes issue from the speakers as Mike turns and pads back to the couch, sinking down beside El, wrapping an arm around her shoulder, slightly concerned by her guarded body language. He opens his mouth to speak, but El lifts a finger and presses it to his lips, effectively silencing him.

“Listen,” she instructs, her voice soft. Mike nods and gives her shoulder a quick and gentle squeeze before focusing in on the music filling the basement.

It’s a familiar song, one that he’s heard several times before, blaring from Nancy’s room—sometimes, unfortunately, with her singing along. But it’s a song he’s never listened to before now, not really. Foot tapping along in time to the beat, Mike really hears the song for the first time and is suddenly struck by the lyrics, feeling a lump form in his throat.

*If you're lost you can look and you will find me
Time after time*

*If you fall I will catch you, I will be waiting
Time after time*

"It's our song," El whispers, once the music ends, the final notes giving way to a moment of static, the popping of the cassette player, and a short, profound silence between them. "Nancy said that boyfriends and girlfriends have songs."

"El," Mike sputters, at a loss for words, "It's...uh...wow...it's perfect."

"I'm glad you like it," El smiles, her eyes boring into his, "I think it's pretty." Mike nods absently, his mind racing and already ten steps ahead of the conversation, his body slowing catching up as he stands suddenly, back perfectly straight, a nervous energy seeping from every fibre of his being.

"Do you want to dance?" Mike asks, words hurrying out of his mouth. El's eyes widen and she looks up at him in confusion for a moment.

"The dance is next month," she reminds him. "And we're already going together." Mike laughs—she had a point; he had asked her to the Harvest Festival Dance months ago.

"I know," he nods, "But I meant right now." He holds his hand out for El, who takes it with a smile, and pulls her close. "Alright," Mike continues, cheeks suddenly feeling very warm due to her proximity, "You remember how it's done, right?"

"Mike." El's voice is flat and when he looks up at her, the sardonic expression on her face makes him blush furiously.

"Right, well..." Mike grins, still red. He gently settles his hands down on her waist and without hesitation she snakes her arms around his neck. "Wait," Mike laughs, beginning to pull away, "The tape."

"I've got it," El says, shaking her head at his forgetfulness and keeping him in place with her feet planted firmly on the ground. A moment later, Mike hears the whirring sound of a cassette rewinding

before the music begins again. The perks of a having superhero girlfriend.

Together, they sway in time to the music; the toes of El's polka dot socks grazing against the toes of Mike's striped ones. With a content sigh, El rests her head against Mike's chest, listening to the sound of his heartbeat. It's a sound more beautiful than any song. El closes her eyes just as Mike's lips graze the top of her head and she smiles against his striped shirt.